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Lie Detectors

TRIAL BY GADGET . . . . . Stanley Meisler

The first lie detector, employed centuries ago, was a handful of rice dropped into the mouth of a suspect. If the rice stayed dry while he answered questions, he clearly was a liar — exposed under the questionable theory that a liar's salivary glands would dry up when gripped by fear. The lie detector used most commonly today is far more sophisticated. Developed by the psychologist and criminologist Leonard Keeler almost forty years ago, it comprises a pneumatic tube that fits across a subject's chest to measure breathing; an inflatable rubber cuff that wraps around the arm to measure blood pressure and a pair of electrodes that touch the fingers and, by the flow of current, measure the dampness of the palm. These instuments activate pens that draw wiggles and waves on a rolling sheet of paper — a process that gives the lie detector its modern name, polygraph, Greek for "many writings." In theory, an examiner can look at the chart, note any unusual wiggles and waves, and nab his man. This polygraph, obviously more complicated than a few grains of rice, is also touted as more accurate. In truth, it is not.

In America, the polygraph has become big business and a fixed part of the national consciousness. Local police officers, tired of more disagreeable and fatiguing methods of questioning, use lie detectors on the husband who glibly announces that he was upstairs snoozing when someone downstairs whacked his wife's head with a bat. Politicians deny they are scalawags and scoundrels and then offer to take a lie-detector test to prove it. Big stores use lie detectors to discover whether prospective employees are, ever have been or ever will be pilferers, perverts or pinkos.

The federal government is devoted to polygraphs. A recent survey by the House Subcommittee on Government Operations, headed by Rep. John E. Moss (D., Calif.) revealed that nineteen federal agencies use them. Two of these — the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency — characteristically classify their use of polygraphs. The other seventeen, according to the report, gave 19,122 lie-detector tests in fiscal 1963. The federal government in that same year owned 512 lie detectors worth $428,066, and had 639 employees, paid $4.3 million a year, who were trained, in some fashion, to operate them. In addition, federal agencies employed private investigators to conduct 322 tests during the year. The government uses the polygraph for many reasons: to investigate leaks of information and other security cases; to question Vietcong guerrillas captured in Vietnam; to investigate crimes at military bases, post offices and other federal jurisdictions; and to screen applicants for federal jobs. A year ago, the Federal Aviation Agency hoped to adopt some simple device to detect bomb-carrying passengers. Under the plan, a passenger would check his baggage at the airline counter, put his hand on a lie detector, and swear he had no bomb. The FAA, however, dropped the plan when no manufacturer could meet the specifications. There have been more extreme proposals for government use of the polygraph. A Rand Corporation study several years ago suggested that they might be used to police an arms-control agreement with the Russians. The U.S. would periodically examine high Russian officials with lie detectors to make certain that they were living up to the agreement.

No thorough survey has been made on the prevalence of lie detectors in state and local government and in private business, but it must greatly exceed the use within the federal government. There are now 500 lie-detector firms, employing 1,000 to 1,500 polygraph examiners, who question subjects at a cost of about $35 a test. *Business Week* says that 80 per cent of their income comes from business firms that want to know if their employees or prospective employees are honest. The income of one of the major security firms, John E.

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